Keeping the Tools Sharp: Case Study of Four Avalanche Fatalities During the Snow Season 05-06 in Alaska

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Each human involved avalanche is unique and the outcomes of subject location and recovery are influenced by the availability of search tools and resources. Alaska has distinctive challenges with organized avalanche rescue due to its size, remoteness, and scarcity of roads and rescue resources. In Southcentral Alaska, rescuers practice avalanche specific skills in the beginning of each winter at an Interagency Avalanche Rescue Workshop. The two day training event is organized by the Alaska Mountain Rescue Group and Alaska Search and Rescue Dogs, with the goals of bringing responding agencies together to sharpen skills, build working relationships and learn new techniques. Staged at a remote location curriculum includes skill stations, lectures and mock avalanche scenarios, which help first responders to prepare for winter rescue operations. During the snow season 05-06, four people died of avalanches in Alaska. Each subject was recovered with a different tool, avalanche transceiver, avalanche dog, RECCO detector and probing. The depicted season illustrates the value of keeping all of the rescue techniques up to date and well practiced.